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glossary

archon - leader
athens - very experienced or very skilled warrior; senior warrior
selini - tideclan and blumeclan's goddess
gataki - kit
ilios - valleyclan and sparkclan's god
strategus - deputy
omega - very young or inexperienced warrior
mantis — cat who receives prophecies and omens
metics - warrior that is not an athens or omega
mitera - queen
neophyte - apprentice
physician - cat who treats diseases and injuries
presbyteros - elder

i

my sister's dead.

ii

she had been slashed open from chin to tail.

iii

the wound gaped open, a carmine chasm.

iv

her bone-white claws were bloodied black, milk-pale teeth bared at no one and nothing.

V

just the moonless sky, and the scintillating dust of distant stars, starkly white in her empty, black pupils.

vi

my head felt heavy with a stygian stupor — one that clung to the faint thrumming in my chest and the thoughts that flickered hollow in my head.

vii

dimly, i registered a shriek.

then shouting.

ix

it hurt my ears, but i felt the pain as though it were nothing.

X

"oh *selini*, is that *sedgespark*?"

xi

"she's - she's *dead*!"

xii

"who *did* this?"

voices rose above and overlapped each other in cacophonic chaoes — in whimpers, in wails, in screeches, in *screams*.

xiii

"lizardfern!"

xiv

"are you okay?"

XV

"yeah," i croak — force my rasping voice up, up, *up* from the back of my throat and into the cool air. "i'm fine. i'm okay."

xvi

try telling that to sedgespark .

xvii

pinemarsh's brown eyes bore into mine.

xviii

"you must feel terrible."

xix

his voice sounded stilted — even the tilt of his head seemed a little too stiff.

XX

are you the killer?

xxi

even as i thought it, i scolded myself.

xxii

but the murk of doubt still lingered, lacing every dubious thought.

xxiii

"here, follow me," pinemarsh said, his gentle voice like that of a queen consoling their kits. "i'll take you back to camp."

xxiv

pinemarsh's eyes contained nothing but kindness and sorrow — a pathos so profound it made my own grief seem trivial beside it.

did he love sedgespark ?

XXV

"the patrol will take care of sedgespark's body." he glanced back as he spoke, his gaze polite and any emotion he might have felt gone. "i'll take you to the physicians' den."

i protested, but he cut me off. "you'll feel better, lizardfern. trust me."

i didn't — trust him, that is. panic started to steal over me like a fog, shrouding my sight and senses until i wasn't quite sure what was what.

xxvi

he must have sensed my anxiety, for he slowed and turned to me once more. "lizardfern, the physicians won't hurt you. *i* won't hurt you. i care about you; you're my clanmate, and brumeclanners help brumeclanners."

without another word, he kept walking.

meekly, i followed.

xxvii

"are you alright?" asked minnowpaw, eyes caramel moons.

xxviii

the other physician's neophyte, mottledpaw, gave minnowpaw a scathing look. "does he look 'alright' to you?"

xxix

minnowpaw lowered her grey head and muttered something i didn't catch.

not hearing her answer was almost a relief.

XXX

mottledpaw's face softened, and his voice turned gentle. "lizardfern, breathe. in, and out. well done, that's good. keep breathing: in, and out. how about some poppy seeds for the shock?" his words were muted, almost as if hushed, but there was a surety in his voice that told lizardfern he knew what he was doing.

"minnowpaw, go get foxflight and littlebranch. i'll get the poppy seeds."

xxxi

mottledpaw came back with three small, black seeds, and told me to take two.

"the third," he said, "i'll only give you if it doesn't get any better."

i downed two poppy seeds, and waited for them to numb the numbness. to silence the shrillness in my ears and subdue the throbbing in my head. to slow the *thump-thud*ding of my tautly-ribbed heart.

it wasn't as effective as i'd hoped. but anything was better than before.

xxxii

"feel better?" mottledpaw asks.

"y-yeah." i don't meet his eyes; instead, i stare at the ground. "can i... go now?"

xxxiii

"not quite yet," foxflight says from behind me.

the ginger she-cat fixes me with her viridiscent-yellow gaze, then says, "lizardfern'll have to rest a while. poppy seeds are effective, but they don't last forever. after all, it's no easy thing, having a sibling taken away from you."

is that sympathy i see in her eyes, or something more? they're clouded with what can only be a memory.

i wish sedgespark's cold carcass, torn in two like a too-big piece of prey, was just a *memory*.

xxxiv

but it's not.

XXXV

it's reality, as cold and clear as leafbare water.

xxxvi

that night, sedgespark is alive again and in front of me.

xxxvii

her amber eyes were unfocused, fixed to a vacant point on the horizon.

xxxviii

but then they flick to me and harden.

xxxix

"*you*."

xl

her voice is a snake, the syllable a flick of a forked tongue, spittle heavy with venom.

xli

i stare at her.

xlii

she stares back.

xliii

"you didn't save me."

xliv

i don't say anything. i can't.

my disbelief is too great.

xlv

"you *could have saved me*," she says, insistent.

my only response is a feeble shake of my head.

xlvi

"you could have stopped me!" sedgespark wailed, her voice rising — shrill, shaky. like a leaf in the wind.

xlvii

"*no*," i choked out.

"i couldn't have!" *i could have.*

"it's not my fault!" *it's my fault.*

"i couldn't have saved you!"

i could have.

xlviii

sedgespark simply watched me with empty eyes.

xlix

"i wanted to be archon." she smiled a bitter smile and continued, "*sedgemoon, archon of brumeclan*."

1

her voice turned sour, without any remains of reminiscence. "i never even got to be *strategus*."

li

"i never even got to be an *athens*."

her voice was as biting and brittle as newly-formed ice.

lii

it was sunup. i could see the shaky orb that was the sun searing the horizon with the spill of liquid gold and ochre.

the sunlight stained sedgespark ecru, and i could see how dark the earth was through the translucence of her lily-white paws.

her amber eyes fluttered half-shut, and her voice quivered when she said her next words.

"lizardfern, you must succeed where i failed. please, become archon of brumeclan. only then will i be at peace."

liii

i had never seen sedgespark so desperate.

and so i agreed.

liv

become archon of brumeclan . only then will i be at peace.

lv

the words, reverberating in my head, were a second heartbeat — a constant reminder of my promise.

lvi

i woke up.

lvii

minnowpaw stood hesitantly over me, amber eyes full of the worry she was duty-bound to feel.

lviii

"did you sleep well?"

lix

i flicked my ears dismissively.

"well enough."

lx

but behind my carefully constructed nonchalance lay the susurrus of sedgespark's words.

lxi

minnowpaw believed me. i could tell by her honey-hued gaze, as wide and trusting as a newborn kit's.

she was gullible; i saw that.

lxii

"you could exploit that," remarked a lilting voice.

on the edge of the shaky orb that was my vision, i saw my sister's tabby pelt and the earnest shine of yellow-brown eyes.

lxiii

i cleared my throat before speaking, voice softened by carefully feigned hesitance.

"minnowpaw?"

lxiv

minnowpaw blinked at me. "yeah?"

for a heartbeat, i faltered.

"don't hesitate," said my sister at once, eyes burning into the back of my head, her breath fanning my pelt.

i pushed on before minnowpaw could notice my tentativeness. she didn't, if the absentmindedness in her amber eyes was any indication.

"does selini give prophecies to metics? or just mantei?" i asked.

lxv

minnowpaw's easy expression transformed into one of something new - respect, *reverence*.

"selini sent you a prophecy?" her voice is hushed, as if it is some unheard-of idea.

lxvi

almost of their own accord, my eyes flicked to the ground, and i scuffed a brown paw in sheepish pretense.

"well, it wasn't really a *prophecy*," i said, slowly as if weighing my words. "more of an... *omen*, i think it's called."

lxvii

minnowpaw's ochre eyes were round and almost aquiver in their sockets — twin full moons, reflection shaking in the water.

"what was it?" she breathed.

lxviii

my sister giggled with glee, a sound i couldn't remember her making since the two of were kits.

"you've got this," sedgespark purred. "i'm proud of you, brother."

despite myself, i smiled slightly. but when minnowpaw looked up again, my face was blank.

"i didn't really understand it," i lied. "it didn't make much sense; it was just a lizard, under a big, green, leafy plant — with fronds. it looked kinda like a fern; i'm not entirely sure." i paused, before adding, "the lizard was illuminated by the moonlight; it was brown and stripy, but the moon made it look silver, almost."

lxix

minnowpaw stared at me, maw wide and amber eyes awed.

"i... i think i know what it means." she seemed to stumble over the words, simple as they were, as if she couldn't get them out quick enough.

my only response was, "oh?"

sedgepark was grinning.

lxx

"well, it's about you, lizardfern," minnowpaw said. "it's obvious, really — the lizard beneath what was probably a fern."

"yes," i respond, trying not to sound too eager. "i understand that, but... what does the moon mean?"

lxxi

minnowpaw hesitated.

i saw it in the flicker of her eyes, the slight rocking of her forepaws — the way her gaze shifted away from mine, almost fearful.

"what do you think it means?" she returned.

lxxii

i frowned slightly, trying to look as though i was thinking.

"i dunno," i said at last. "maybe something'll happen to me at night?"

something bordering disappointment gleamed in minnowpaw's cautious eyes.

lxxiii

"i'll ask dovethistle about it," minnowpaw said decisively. "she's the mantis, after all — if anyone understands visions, she does."

i was quiet. would dovethistle know i was lying? i knew nothing about how visions worked. and for all the mantis knew, it could have been a mere dream.

lxxiv

mottledpaw had walked in, green eyes searching.

"sleep well, lizardfern?" the question was genuine, but it contained none of minnowpaw's gentleness. only a clinical coolness, to be expected of a physician.

"well enough," i repeated.

lxxv

"mottledpaw, he says he's been given an vision from selini," minnowpaw said quickly.

the tortoiseshell tom frowned. "well, it's unusual for a mere metics to receive visions, but not unheard of. what did you see, lizardfern?"

i paused only briefly before saying, "um, a lizard under a plant of some sort. it had fronds, so a fern? i'm not sure. and the moon was shining down on it, so bright that it made the lizard and fern look silver."

minnowpaw glanced at mottledpaw, whose gaze was unreadable.

then, "minnowpaw, lizardfern. come with me; i'm going to the mantis."

lxxvi

physically, dovethistle was far from intimidating. she was solid grey — nothing more, nothing less — and she was small, slender in a frail sort of way.

but the way her ordinary brown eyes burned into mine was far from ordinary.

"lizardfern," dovethistle meowed. it was a statement, but her tone — almost inquisitive in inflection — seemed to be prompting a response.

she didn't wait for one, however.

"to what do i owe the pleasure of your company?"

just a hint of irony coloured her otherwise amiable tone.

lxvii

"it's lizardfern," mottledpaw meowed, at the same time minnowpaw blurted, "lizardfern got a vision."

lxviii

mottledpaw gave minnowpaw an exasperated look. the latter mumbled something that sounded like an apology.

lxxix

dovethistle's eyes gleamed with amusememt.

lxxx

"a vision sent by selini herself, you say?"

lxxxi

i nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

lxxxii

dovethistle snorted, and muttered something that sounded like, "so be it."

lxxxiii

dovethistle gave me a pointed look.

lxxxiv

"i'd like to speak to lizardfern," dovethistle meowed.

"go ahead," mottledpaw said.

lxxxv

"*alone*."

lxxxvi

mottledpaw and minnowpaw left.

lxxxvii

dovethistle watched them go with slanted umber eyes, then turned back to me.

lxxxviii

"explain, *lizardfern*, why you are lying."

lxxxix

there had been no accusation in her tone, but i immediately felt defensive.

xc

"i'm not."

xci

my voice was surprisingly steady.

xciv

"i'm willing to help," said dovethistle at last.

i saw my sister stiffen.

xcv

"what? why?" i exclaimed, not bothering to disguise my shock.

"you're *ruining* it," snapped sedgespark.

xcvi

"because *you* could change things!"

xcvii

i had never seen dovewhisker so animated.

her brown eyes were almost bronze in the gilded, golden light as she spat, "i'm sick and tired of being cooped up in this den because the *stupid* doctrine says i can't have friends, i can't have a mate, and i can't have kits! all because of my stupid brother dying and giving me this stupid job!"